

Family, friends mourn passing of Worcester's Michael True, renowned activist, poet and educator

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WORCESTER – Michael True believed in peace, the power of art and poetry, and the worth of his adopted hometown, the city of Worcester.

“But he didn’t just talk about ideas,” said his son, John True. “He implemented them. He was an activist.”

Mr. True, also a renowned author, poet and historian who taught at Assumption College and in classrooms around the world, passed away last week in Minneapolis at the age of 85. He is survived by his wife, Mary Pat, six children, 10 grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Mr. True was a central figure in Worcester’s nonviolence community, taking part in protests big and small, for causes well-known and unsung. Those who knew him remembered a man committed to what he believed in, willing to risk health and reputation, and who, despite his illustrious resume, never looked down on anyone.

“He wasn’t Dr. True, Ph.D. He was Mike,” said John True, who recalled how his father was, on the one hand, an international peace scholar who rubbed shoulders with the luminaries of his time and traveled across the globe, but on the other was someone willing to just stand on a street corner holding an anti-war sign.

Born and raised in Oklahoma, Mr. True studied at the University of Oklahoma and received advanced degrees from the University of Minnesota and Duke University before settling in Worcester to join the faculty at Assumption College, where he taught for decades before stepping down in 1995. Throughout

his long career and even afterward, he held numerous leadership positions at local organizations as well as global ones, like the International Peace Research Association Foundation, where he served as president.

According to his family, he published 12 books, wrote innumerable articles and other papers, taught at 20 colleges across the world, and helped found several organizations here in the region.

Scott Schaeffer-Duffy, a founding member of the Saints Francis & Thérèse Catholic Worker in Worcester along with his wife, Claire, recalled Mr. True as a link to a past generation of nonviolence activists. Whether they were religious or secular leaders, artists or writers, “Michael drew from all of them,” he said.

Mr. True also was willing to sacrifice for his own activism, Mr. Schaeffer-Duffy recalled, from being jailed for resisting the Vietnam War to teaching students in a freezing classroom in Nanjing, China.

“He did stuff a lot of academics and other people won’t even consider,” he said, adding that Mr. True showed his character when he would visit the Schaeffer-Duffys’ first rough Catholic Worker houses in Washington, D.C. “He’d stay at our house. Most people won’t even drive to our neighborhood.”

Mr. True’s son, Michael, recalled how his father would unfailingly stand in Lincoln Square once a week to protest the Iraq War.

“He’d end these international trips” to stick to that commitment, he said. “In the rain, in the snow, he’d stand out there and hold a sign. I’d ask him, ‘How did it go?’ And he’d say, ‘The finger count was down’ ... he had a sense of humor.”

And despite his intimidating list of accomplishments, Mr. True “would approach you without any condescension,” Mr. Schaeffer-Duffy said. “He would approach you with enthusiasm and respect, and engage in a way that made you feel, in short order, that he was a friend.

“He gave such good advice to all us young activists. We owe him a tremendous amount of gratitude.”

The city of Worcester as well has suffered a “terrible loss,” he added. “He was fantastically loyal to the city. He brought people here from all over the world.”

He also has left a lasting legacy here through the organizations he helped found, including the Center for Nonviolent Solutions, the Worcester County Poetry Association, and the Worcester Review.

“One of the things our family wants to make clear is how much he loved Worcester,” John True said. “He loved the rich cultural history here, the history of activism. He loved the writers, the poets from Worcester.”

He also loved his home on Westland Street, where John remembered growing up with a steady stream of visitors. “Robert Bly, Stanley Kunitz, Dorothy Day - we had so many famous people come through there. We’d eat dinner with them, talk with them. It was really something,” he said.

At Assumption, meanwhile, “he was the conscience for a big part of the college,” said his former colleague, professor Paul Ady.

“He was an inspiration to so many students,” he said, adding that Mr. True was never one to hide his activism. “He could be a pretty intense guy. He’d make you think, ‘You better step up and stand for something.’ Because you could see it in his eyes.”

Thanks to his reputation as a peace scholar, Mr. True also put the college “on the map, to some extent” in that field, Mr. Ady said.

He also helped put Worcester on the map, thanks in large part to his efforts to bring poets to the city. He even co-founded what is now a bridge program with Nanjing that allows poets from that region to come to Worcester.

He influenced a generation of local poets as well, said John Hodgen, writer-in-residence at Assumption, author of five books of poetry, and one of Mr. True’s former students at the college.

“He was a mentor, a truth-seeker. His presence just seemed to change things. He was always looking at something on the horizon that we as students weren’t aware of,” he said. “He literally changed lives ... he was a truly inspirational individual.”